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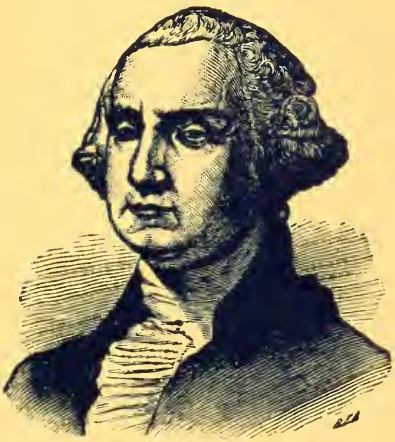
The Character

of

Washington



by

Dr. Arthur W. Little

A Sermon addressed to the

Sons of the Revolution

THE CHARACTER

OF

WASHINGTON

BY

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CHAPLAIN OF THE SOCIETY OF THE SONS OF THE REVOLUTION IN THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, RECTOR OF ST. MARK'S CHURCH, EVANSTON

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AN EXTEMPORE SERMON PREACHED BEFORE THE SOCIETY

ON

WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY, 1903

Stenographed by Mr. R. H. Wyman, a Son of the Revolution

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The Character of Washington

TEXT:—"*Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us. The Lord hath wrought great glory by them.*" Ecclesiasticus XLIV, 1-2.

It is well to remember the great and the good in Church and in State. The recurring festivals of the Christian Year, commemorating notable events in the life of the Founder of Christianity or in the lives of the Apostles, Saints, Martyrs of the Early Church, are examples of this custom—examples salutary and beneficent.

The same principle applies to our great national anniversary which is called Independence Day or the Fourth of July, to Lincoln's birthday, and to the day we are now celebrating—the Twenty-second of February.

I never think of the subject of Patriotism without first of all thinking of that great man, born this day, who, and who alone, is entitled to be called "The Father of His Country." God has raised up many great men for us, especially in times of national danger and distress. But George Washington, above all men that this country has ever produced, and, I think, above all men that any nation has ever produced, has set a high, noble and exalted standard of patriotism and love of country. Let us, therefore, this morning contemplate him as a man, as a Christian, as a general and as a statesman.

His character as a man is one of the richest and most precious of our inheritances as a nation. No man ever lived who had, in my opinion, so perfect a balance of virtues as George Washington. It is quite impossible to sum up and give in a single word the chief characteristics of his mind and heart. Perhaps you will find them at least substantially grouped under a conspicuous and patient equanimity and self-mastery; and in these things, taken all in all, he never had a superior, and I think never an equal, in history.

Hannibal was a greater general. Caesar was a greater general and, perhaps, a greater statesman. Napoleon was a greater general and certainly a more brilliant statesman. But not one of them approached him in his perfect balance of virtues and in the roundness and completeness of his character. Perhaps Moses of old, and in more recent times King Alfred the Great, are the only characters of history that approach the Father of His Country.

Among his many virtues, one of the most conspicuous was truthfulness. A glorious virtue! the absence of which is not only a blot upon character, but is the absolute ruin of all that is beautiful and admirable in human life. The higher critics tell us that the story of Washington and the hatchet is no longer to be regarded as true. Nevertheless, it is at least of symbolic and allegorical value. If it be not true, it is safe to say that it would have been true, if the alleged circumstances had ever arisen. Honest all through his life, he was a man of absolute integrity which nothing could shake and nothing could corrupt. Indeed, it is said that when, as a wealthy planter, he shipped a

great deal of the produce of his plantation to the West India Islands, the custom house officers never cared to inspect any goods marked, "George Washington, Mt. Vernon." They knew that every article that came from him was exactly what it purported to be. Who would not rather have such a tribute of praise from the custom house officers than to be able to smuggle in priceless cases of jewels and lace?

Washington was a man of clean and pure life, a man who from boyhood to old age needed not to be ashamed in the presence of man or woman; he could always look another in the eye. Furthermore, he was always a man of moral earnestness, diligence, punctuality, modesty, dignity, calmness, courtesy, and above all of a sensible and manly piety, a piety without cant, without hypocrisy, without display, loving, noble, self-respecting, humble. There is for all of us a valuable lesson in this very fact, that he could be a religious, God-fearing man without any of the disagreeable cant, long-facedness and austerity which have too often marred the cheerful and manly religion of Jesus Christ.

Washington was a man who loved nature, who loved animals, who loved little children. There is something wrong in the moral make-up of the man who does not love nature, and does not love animals, and does not love little children. He loved them all, and found place for them all in his capacious heart. Furthermore, he was always respectful, courteous and affable to women. He was kind to slaves. Indeed, in his heart he was a wise and judicious abolitionist. He did not approve of slavery, though, like Saint

Paul, he knew that slavery was so gigantic an institution and so rooted in the community that it could not be abolished at once. But he set an example by freeing his own slaves.

I have somewhere read the story that at one time he was walking along the roadside near his old home in the company of a very proud and haughty officer, when a negro passed them and, meekly stepping out of the way, bowed to these gentlemen. Washington, with his wonted courtesy, returned the bow. The other man said to him contemptuously, "Do you bow to niggers?" Washington replied, "Would you have me less polite than the poor colored man?"

He did those duties that pertained to him in his boyhood faithfully and well. As a young man, after he became a surveyor, penetrating through the wilderness of Virginia, he did his surveying well. As a woodsman and hunter he excelled, and was a master of all that pertained to woodcraft. As a wealthy planter, a Virginian of the old school, he did his duty in that state of life, and did it well. As a vestryman of his parish church, he did his work well. In his faithful attendance upon divine service, in his loyalty to the old Church, in the example that he set to all his neighbors, he did well. As a member of the House of Burgesses, that is to say, a representative to the Legislature of the Colony of Virginia, he did his work well. There is a beautiful picture, only too brief, of Washington in the character of a planter and burgess, a colonel of militia and a gentleman of old Virginia, which you will find in Thackeray's "Virginians," which I believe to be a substantially

true picture of Washington in his earlier days before the Revolution. As a soldier and a statesman, he did his work more than well.

It is, of course, in the eight years' struggle out of which our nation, as a nation, was born that the glory and the sublimity of his character are most conspicuous. Here we see that, alike in adversity and in prosperity, he always preserved that perfect balance of mind which we may call equanimity. I know of no example of a man who remained so absolutely calm and unmoved, whether in victory or in defeat, as did this *anax andrōn*, this veritable *king of men*.

One of his particular accomplishments as a general was not merely the calmness and dignity with which he endured defeat, but the skill with which he rose superior to misfortune. As a young man, after the disastrous defeat of the British and Colonial troops under General Braddock, it was Colonel Washington who saved the remnant of that unfortunate army, and conducted with masterly skill what is said to be one of the longest continuous retreats in martial history. Nor did he forget, even in the anguish of that defeat, his religious duties. As the chaplain of the regiment had been killed, Washington read the Office of the Dead over the dust and for the soul of the brave, strong, stubborn and unfortunate Braddock.

Alas! that so many of the gallant British officers of to-day seem not yet to have learned the lesson of "Braddock's Defeat."

Again, in the remarkable retreat across New Jersey, he displayed a skill and generalship which are really deserving of higher praise than the winning of many a victory.

During the long and desperate struggle of the war, he was left without adequate resources in the way of officers and men, arms and ammunition, clothing and commissary supplies, and with a great lack of enthusiasm and loyalty throughout the army and throughout the land. In measuring, therefore, his greatness as a general, we must not judge of victories *per se*, but of victories won in spite of adverse circumstances, and of disasters transmuted into success. Frederick the Great, who was considered the ablest general of the world during the eighteenth century, said that Washington's victories from the 25th of December, 1776, to the 4th of January, 1777, were the most brilliant recorded in the pages of history.

But perhaps the grandeur of his character shone forth more than ever in the melancholy and desperate winter in Valley Forge. There, with his starving, sick and dying men, whose privations he shared, he bore up with a courage, with a fortitude and with a cheerfulness that are the wonder and amazement of all who read that pathetic history. Then, too, were conspicuously seen his habits of devotion and trust in God. You all doubtless remember the story of the old Quaker who, out in the woods, heard a voice, and peering through the trees saw Washington's horse tied, and, near by, the great Commander in Chief kneeling upon his knees and praying aloud to God, casting all his cares upon Him. And you know how the Quaker went home and told his wife that he was sure of the success of the Continental army, for God would hear such prayers as those.

There is a special lesson for us here, and particularly, it

may be, for some of you men and boys who are sometimes tempted to think it is not a manly thing to pray. But I tell you it is a manly thing. Not only that, but it is the greatest of privileges that we, poor and weak as we are, have access to the Throne of Divine Strength, that we may lay all our cares and burdens there, and find grace to help in every time of need.

At last there came the time which is described by an English poet in these words:

"When the tide of war was turned on their foes,
And the eagle in air triumphant arose,
And the shout was heard o'er land and sea:
'Our cause is blest and Columbia free.'"

It followed, as a matter of course—for who could gainsay or oppose it?—that the man who had led our feeble forces to glorious victory should be chosen to be the first President of the now organized and united States—the only man who has been unanimously chosen to that high office.

I cannot take the time this morning to describe his eight years' administration. But surely never a chief magistrate was called upon to guide a ship of state through more perilous breakers than was the first pilot of our ship. That same English poet from whom I have already quoted says:

"Then wisdom spoke in that chieftain's voice,
When called to rule by the people's choice;
But soon, for his country's wish too soon,
He resigned his sway, that country's boon;
Retired again to the sylvan shade,
To the ploughshare turned his patriot blade;
And greater than king, in his jeweled crown,
Was he when he laid that greatness down."

There is something in the character, in the bearing, in the work of this great statesman, and in the humble laying

aside of his glory and retiring to private life, that seems to lift him above the plane of mankind. He has in these respects, as in most others, no superior, and scarcely an equal in all history. Antiquity would have placed him among the gods of Olympus, and would have reared to him many a noble temple and many a smoking altar, as to Hercules, when his twelve labors were performed.

Washington was as charming and attractive in his personal life and manners as he was great and glorious in character. And to-day his memory is almost as dear to the nation against which he fought as it is to the nation whose Father he is.

And yet we cannot say that Washington was absolutely perfect. We cannot say that of any mere man. Indeed, though I almost hate to say so, there is a certain satisfaction to us in the knowledge that he did at least occasionally lose his temper, and that, like Moses, he "spake unadvisedly with his lips."

Under provocation which would have tempted a saint, at the battle of Monmouth, when the treason, or the stupidity, of Lee was bringing about a terrible disaster to Washington's army, we are told that Washington did lose his temper, and that he swore. But these very things, microscopic blots upon the solar radiance of his character, only remind us that he was a *man*, and keep us from believing him to have been so wholly above us that it is impossible for us to imitate him. They make us believe that after all he was but a man, of true human nature, a man "of like passions with ourselves."

I know of no character in history who seems to have been

more certainly raised up of God for his special work than was this great man. And one reason why I think he was divinely raised up is because God preserved him all through unspeakable perils and risks until his warfare was accomplished and his labor ended. Few men underwent greater hazards of life than he; yet he never received, I may say, a scratch.

In the terrible battle known as "Braddock's Defeat", Washington was in the very thickest of the fight. Two horses were shot under him; four bullets pierced his clothes. An Indian chief, who had ambushed him, and who was in close range, fired his rifle at him again and again, while the whole company of Indians under this special chief singled out this one man for their guns and arrows. Finally that Indian chief stopped firing at him, and said, "That man is going to become a great sachem, for he is under the protection of the Great Spirit." They could not kill him. I do not know why their bullets went astray. They were keen, accurate marksmen. I believe Almighty God wrought a miracle to save him, because He had a work for him to do. At the battles of Princeton and Monmouth, Washington exposed himself recklessly to the fire of the foe, yet came out unscathed. At the battle of Yorktown, Washington, from his advanced position, was needlessly exposed to the fire of the enemy, when General David Cobb, then a Colonel on the Commander's staff, rode up to him and begged him not to expose himself to such peril. Washington replied: "Colonel Cobb, if you fear for yourself you may retire, but I stay here." They both stayed.

In summing up the character of this great man, it seems

to me that he possessed several virtues which we as a nation are inclined to lack, and some of which we are growing to lack more and more. His calmness, his dignity, his judicious conservatism—these are characteristics that are not particularly conspicuous in the American people. These traits were seen in his religious life. He was a member of the old Church of England, a Churchman of sincere, manly, unpretentious piety and devotion in a cold, skeptical and unchurchly age.

And here I pause to say that there is a popular misconception as to the attitude of the Anglican Church in the Colonies during the Revolution. It is commonly said, and it is popularly believed, that the patriotic work of the Revolution was done almost entirely by the Puritans of New England and their religious *confrères* in the Middle States. True, they did their part with characteristic boldness, heroism and self-sacrifice. I would be the last to belittle the honorable and glorious share of the Puritans in the work of Independence. It is true also that in New England, where there were but few Churchmen, and they for the most part new-comers who had not taken root in the soil, it is true, I say, in New England, that Churchmen were for the most part "Tories" or "Royalists", and were loyal to the British crown. But, after all, the great work of the Revolution was not accomplished so much by the New Englanders as by the sturdy Cavaliers of Virginia, with the Marylanders, the Carolinians and the Georgians.

In praising the New Englanders, as I do, it may not be out of place to mention also the fact that throughout the Colonies Churchmen were not generally Tories. Of the

signers of the Declaration of Independence, *two-thirds* were Anglican Churchmen, as were also a majority of the members of the Congress that adopted the Constitution of the United States. And George Washington was a humble and devout communicant of the Anglo-Catholic Church, the old Mother Church of us all.

Finally, dear brethren, among the many legacies that Washington has left us, there is one which is coming to be appreciated more than ever before, and that is the legacy of friendship and love to the Mother Country. He had the wisdom, he had the far-reaching sagacity in the days, when after the bitter contest everything English was hated and despised, to see that it was the Mother Country of England, and not France, although France had helped us, that would in the future be our dearest friend, our most faithful neighbor, our strongest ally. And in spite of opposition and obloquy, he expressed this conviction to many who were opposed to the friendship of England in those days. It has taken a long time for this legacy, if I may so say, to be probated and accepted by the American people, and by the English people for that matter; but I think that now we are entering into possession. I believe that henceforth and forevermore these two great Anglo-Saxon nations—England and the United States of America—will walk down history hand in hand, and will stand together for the same great principles of religion and justice, of liberty, of humanity and of progress. And I would have you believe that this glorious consummation, fraught with blessings to England, to us and to the world, is one of the most precious of all the legacies of the "Father of His Country."

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